

# EDITORIALS

THE ISSUE: POLYGAMY AND CHILD ABUSE

## Target the crime

**T**exas rushed in with a rescuer's zeal, but a look at Arizona history shows that a polygamous cult could ultimately benefit from the raid on its secretive compound. The cult gets an even bigger bounce from evidence that the raid was based on a hoax.

Make no mistake: This is a cult that practices mind control and sanctifies child sexual abuse. Justice awaits the perpetrators.

But the backlash from Texas raids could make it harder to prosecute cult crimes there and on the Arizona-Utah border.

The image of soft-spoken women in pioneer dresses begging the state to give back their children is compelling enough to make a lot of people forget what this is about.

These mothers from another era don't look capable of permitting the horrors supposed to have taken place at the Yearning for Zion Ranch near Eldorado, Texas.

In truth, those women are powerless to "permit" or "refuse" anything, say those who have left Warren Jeffs' Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. They do as they are told.

A long ago raid in Arizona helped ossify the cult's control. In 1953, when Arizona authorities rode north to Short Creek to bust up a polygamist sect in what is now called Colorado City, public sympathy went to women who didn't look that much different from those in Texas today.

What followed was "50 years of darkness," says Arizona's Attorney General Terry Goddard. Without public support, law enforcement ignored the group.

The cult used the Short Creek raid as a tool to seal its sins in secrecy. The story was repeated as evidence of the evils of the outside world. Talk to strangers, mothers were told, and you could lose your children.

In isolation, cult members became obedient. Those who have fled say the cult institutionalizes child abuse. Little girls are married off and young boys expelled to counter the imbalances of plural marriage.

Jeffs leads an empire built on fear and funded through the hard work of its members, along with crimes, like welfare fraud.

About four years ago, Goddard and Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff began going after the cult's Arizona-Utah operations.

They did it methodically. They did it by offering services in the community and trying to build a level of trust that would result in court testimony. They did it by going after Jeffs' ill-gotten gains. Jeffs built the Texas compound, valued at \$21 million, as a safe haven. It didn't save him.

The efforts of Goddard and Shurtleff —



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Texas officials escort women and children from the Yearning for Zion Ranch to buses.

coupled those of Mohave County Attorney Matt Smith — led to several successful prosecutions, including Jeffs' conviction in Utah as an accomplice to the rape of a 14-year-old girl. The victim testified. That made all the difference. Jeffs is scheduled to stand trial in Arizona later this year on similar charges.

Goddard says the Texas raid likely won't have an impact on Arizona's case against Jeffs. It's the future that concerns Goddard.

After progress getting witnesses to testify against perpetrators in Colorado City and Hildale, Utah, the Texas raid reinforces the cult's warning that authorities only want to destroy the community. Arizona and Utah's message to cult members has been that it is not the community itself, but illegalities within the community that are being targeted, Goddard says. This is a key distinction that helps win the cooperation of victims.

Without victims willing to testify, prosecutions can fail. Women who have left the cult often take great risks to bring their children with them. Providing refuge is one of the services Arizona offers in Colorado City. That's important to win witness cooperation, too. Mothers who fear losing their children are unlikely to cooperate with prosecutors.

The Texas raids gave cult members reason to fear, but little reason to testify. With skill and diligence, Texas may successfully prosecute cases of child sexual abuse as a result of the raids. But even with a pregnant teenager as evidence, such cases can be lost if the victim will not testify. That has happened in Arizona, Goddard says. Those failures make the cult look even more powerful in the eyes of its followers. That's why what Texas did may make it harder to pursue justice against those who disguise child sexual abuse as religion in Arizona.